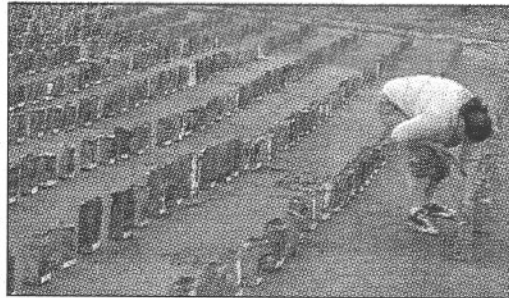


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TAMMIE SMITH

Rows of luminarias, placed on land where businesses had been built, mark a burial ground for free blacks in the Civil War era.

Cemetery for freed blacks in N.Va. rededicated

In a vacant Alexandria lot, 1,000 candles are lit to honor the dead

BY TAMMIE SMITH

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

ALEXANDRIA — Dana Gadeken, 17, hand-decorated about 20 of the more than 1,000 luminarias that were lined up in neat rows on the vacant lot at the corner of South Washington and Church streets.

The luminarias — brown lunch bags containing small tea lights held in place in a bed of sand — were set out Saturday for each man, woman and child believed to have been buried on the grounds, rediscovered in the 1990s as a cemetery.

Those buried there, historians say, were Civil War-era blacks who were newly freed or escaping slavery. They traveled to Alexandria, which was occupied by the Union Army.

While they had freedom, they had little in the way of resources, said Gadeken, who studied the plight of the freedmen for a history class internship with the Alexandria Black History Museum.

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Free

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Living in crowded, unsanitary conditions, many of the freed blacks were disproportionately affected when illnesses swept through the area. "They had extremely poor housing after the Civil War," said Gadeken, a student at West Springfield High School, as she stood on the burial grounds, once forgotten and abandoned. "They had no property. They were free. What were they freed into? Nothing."

A road construction project and research by historians led to the cemetery's discovery.

Alexandria city officials and others gathered at the site Saturday to rededicate the cemetery. The beats of the African Heritage Drummers provided the backdrop for a ceremony that included the pouring of libations and singing of traditional spirituals by the City of Alexandria Choir. Alexandria poet laureate Mary McElveen read a poem written for the occasion. The luminarias were individually decorated by people in the community, including schoolchildren and others who attended community workshops.

"It's to right a wrong," said Lilie Finklea, who with Louise Masoud founded the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery, the group behind the efforts to reclaim the cemetery and treat it with reverence.

"It should not have happened," said Finklea, who has researched the land's history.

"I have lived here all my life, and I had no idea there was a cemetery here," she said later during the program.

An article in The Washington Post 10 years ago brought the cemetery to her attention. Since then, she and others had a historical marker put up to mark the site and have been working since to get more done. At the ceremony dedicating the marker, there were 13 people, said Finklea, and that included a pedestrian just passing by. On Saturday, more than 100 people were present.

Officials say more than 1,800 people were buried at the site between the spring of 1864 and January 1869. Historians know as much because a ledger was kept listing the names of those buried there. By matching names with hospital admission records, possible causes of death were identified. About half those buried were children.

"We have no faces, just names," Finklea said. "Other than images and pictures of that period, we have nothing about the people."

Finklea and others hope that attention brought to the cemetery will prompt people to go to the Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery's Web site, www.freedmenscemetery.org, to view the names and check for possible family connections.

Demolition completed last week finished removing a gas station and an office building that had been built on the site after the 1940s. City archaeologists will continue efforts to identify, map and mark graves, which will remain undisturbed. To date, they have not located any descendants of those buried there, said city archaeologist Pamela J. Cressey.

Rows of graves were found along the edge of the cemetery during a highway construction project, said Steven J. Shephard, Alexandria assistant city archaeologist who oversees the archaeological work with preservation archaeologist Fran Bromberg.

"We excavated 14 trenches to

try to establish what the soils were like and if there was evidence of graves," Shephard said. "We did find evidence in some of the trenches of graves, and we did find some of the graves were very close to the surface because the land had been graded."

In about six months when the archaeological work is complete, the next phase of the project — developing a memorial park — will begin. That will include a design competition for a memorial park.

"I see a wall of names," Finklea said.

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